EXPLORE THE INSIDE STORY OF THE BAND

SPECIAL EDITION

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS WITH BAND INSIDERS

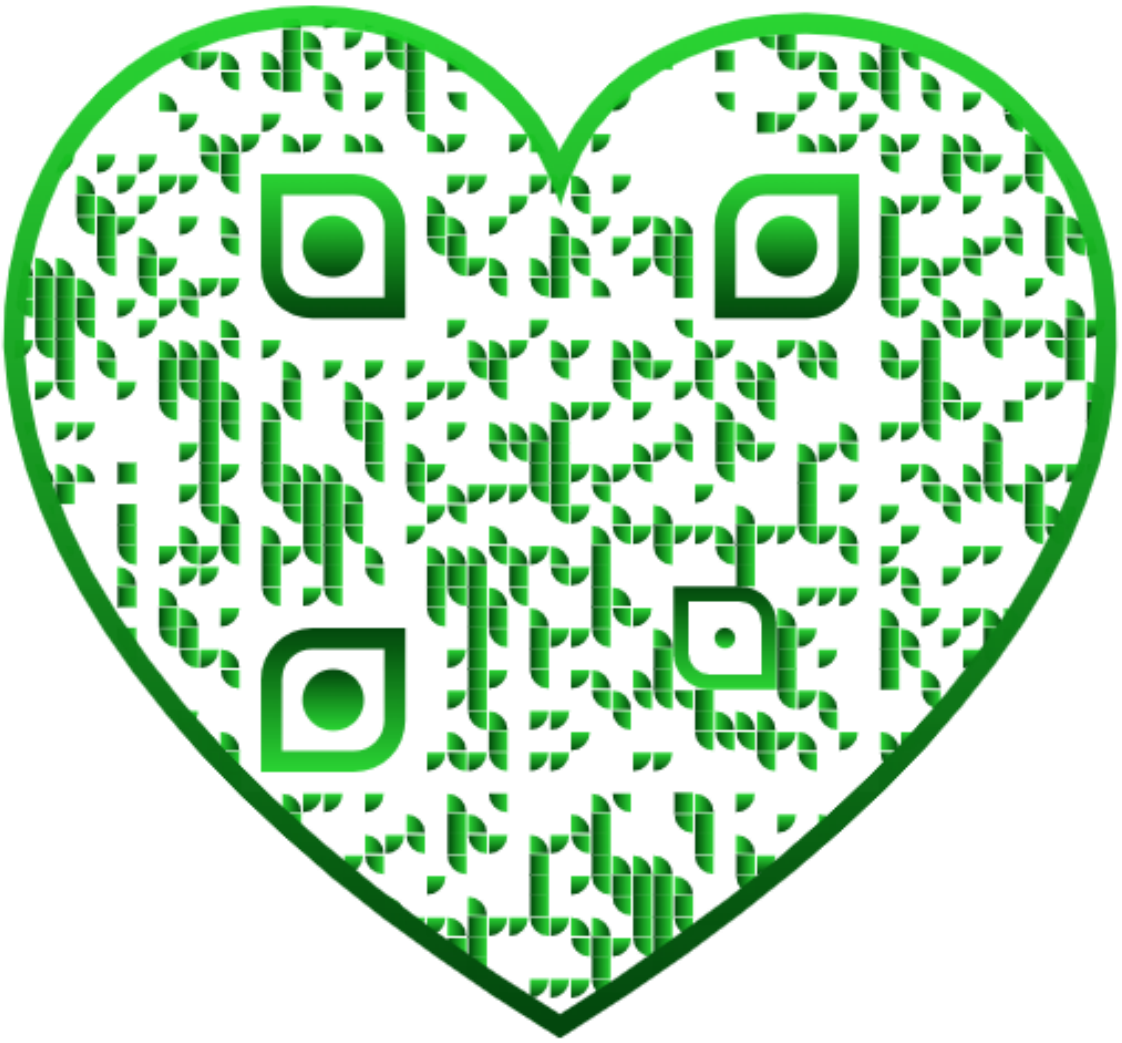
MUSIC LEGENDS

THE ROCK ICONS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

THE MAGAZINE WITH FREE AUDIO AND VIDEO DOWNLOADS

GUNS N' ROSES

THE ULTIMATE COMPANION GUIDE TO THE LIVES AND WORK OF GUNS N' ROSES



MUSIC LEGENDS READER OFFER
GET 20% OFF ALL CODA RECORDS RELEASES ON CD AND VINYL

This Special Edition of Music Legends Magazine is sponsored by Coda Records Ltd. As a valued reader of Music Legends Magazine you are entitled to an exclusive 20% discount code on all Coda Records releses on CD and vinyl. To redeem your 20% discount on any of the great CDs and vinyl albums, just go to **codarecords.co.uk** and enter the code **MLMPROMO20** on the payment checkout page.

All orders through **codarecords.co.uk** for despatch to the UK, USA, Germany, France, Italy and Spain are packed and brought to your door by our fulfilment partner Amazon.

Please note this cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.

YOU CAN VIEW THE FULL CODA RECORDS CATALOGUE AT codarecords.co.uk

CODA RECORDS LTD
www.codarecords.co.uk

amazon
All orders fulfilled by Amazon

mcps

Contents

Author's Note 5

Biography 7

Track-By-Track Analysis 57

Author's Note

Guns N' Roses. The name alone juxtaposes images of violence and romance, aggression and beauty, life and death. For the most volatile and notorious rock 'n' roll band of their generation, it was an appropriate one.

When they emerged from the rougher streets of Los Angeles in 1987, this five-piece band managed to meld the decadence of the Rolling Stones and Aerosmith with the anti-social snarl of the Sex Pistols and the punk scene. This is the story of the rapid ascendancy from club band to record-breaking stadium-fillers and onto their position today. This story is neither unauthorised nor definitive, but rather provides an overview of the bands oeuvre, placing them into their correct musical context and considering some of the key events that make their career such a unique one. I also offer an analysis of all their major recorded output.

The continued influence of Guns N' Roses in music today – especially their jaw-dropping *Appetite for Destruction* debut – cannot be underestimated. As a journalist for magazines such as *Kerrang!*, I have encountered few contemporaries who wouldn't admit to being inspired to pick up a guitar for the first time upon hearing this band. But it is about more than just their music. Through their actions, their look and their lifestyle, Guns N' Roses have defined the essence of the rock 'n' roll spirit as they continue to inhabit a world of their own-making. It's a work of sex and drugs and partying, of life on the edge, life on the fringes of society, a world of paranoia, immense wealth, excess, world travel, endless scrapes, riots, court-cases, cancellations, amazing music and great hair.

Enjoy it.

Ben Myers

Biography

Swaggering out of Los Angeles in the mid-eighites like a gang of pillaging urban pirates, Guns N' Roses went onto become one of the biggest bands of their time, one of the few bands to pass into the pantheon of true rock, stadium-filling titans alongside acts such as Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, Queen and Metallica. They were the rock band that non-rock fans got into, an act that transcended their genre. They were also the most volatile and unpredictable band, courting controversy every step of the way and enjoying a lifestyle that took the rock 'n' roll clichés of disharmony, wealth, inflated egos and self-delusion to new levels.

They say all great bands are built on chemistry, and Guns N' Roses are the perfect example, as demonstrated in the way their classic line-up delivered a classic debut before being diluted and diversified, and never quite matching that same creative peak. But regardless of

who was in the band – and to date there have been many members – Guns N' Roses has always been a by-word for rock 'n' roll excess and danger.

The dangerous and edgy lifestyle was always there, but the success took a while coming. In fact, the band's earlier years were as drug-addled and poverty stricken as any band who had gone before. What is amazing is the fact that these five reprobates ever made it in the first place.

The story begins in Los Angeles, the blackened heartland of American showbiz, in 1985 – a time when rock music was going through a fallow period and the airwaves were dominated by lame pop music and middle of the road rock bands.

Then, as now, the central figure was the band's future frontman, W. Axl Rose. Born William Rose in Lafayette, Indiana, his upbringing was marred by the break-up of his parents and his mother re-marrying – at which point he changed his name to William Rose. His childhood was not a happy one, the frontman claiming to have witnessed domestic abuse and himself being a victim of sexual abuse; he later claims that his perception of women was informed by his upbringing in which sexuality was wrong and a woman's role was often that of victim. It is a subject that he would later explore through numerous Guns N' Roses songs, and which lead to many accusations of misogyny.

At seventeen while attending driving school, he met a fellow young rock music fan and budding guitarist who was key to his future – Jeffrey Isbell, who in-keeping with rock's love of a good sexual innuendo, was soon-to-be-reinvented as Izzy Stradlin. The pair bonded over a shared love of the flamboyant rock bands of the seventies such as Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones and Alice Cooper.

During this time, the teenage Rose also found himself on the wrong side of the law on numerous occasions. Before the age of twenty he had been arrested many times for drunkenness and assault, until his lawyer finally suggested it might be wise to leave Indiana

before he was incarcerated permanently. In the early-eighties, like so many wide-eyed hicks before him, he headed west to Los Angeles to re-unite with Stradlin who had already left town to pursue a career in music.

As future band bassist Duff McKagan remembers it: 'Axl was a fucking wet-behind-the-ears white boy in LA for the first time and was scared to death! He was just scared off his fuckin' ass by what he found in the big city.'

In LA, Stradlin and Rose were dirt-poor. They survived by selling drugs, scamming women and doing whatever it took to feed themselves. At one point Axl donated himself to medical experimentation, chain-smoking cigarettes for white-coated lab technicians. But they did have one thing going for them – a love of music and an appetite to succeed at all costs. They were at least in the perfect place to attempt to become stars. Rose marked the occasion by changing his name to W. Axl Rose, 'Axl' being the name of a band he had briefly played in.

The music scene in Los Angeles in the early-eighties was in a transitional period. Punk rock had given way to hardcore and MTV-friendly new wave, while seventies rock had diversified, becoming harder and heavier in some places and softer in others. Certainly, it was more theatrical and over the top than ever.

Inspired by the glammier end of hard rock – the Stones, New York Dolls, Hanoi Rocks – and punk's hard-edged anti-social stance, Rose joined (and left) a series of bands as vocalist: Hollywood Rose, Rapidfire, LA Guns. His singing style was unique, with Rose demonstrating an ability to sing in a deep throaty rumble one minute, an abrasive, paint-stripping howl the next.

Though his tenure in these bands was short-lived, in the summer of 1985 he persuaded LA Guns guitarist Tracii Guns to join his new venture, dubbed Guns N' Roses. The first line-up was short-lived, with all the original members swiftly being replaced by more competent players from the LA rock scene when some were unable

to play an early show in Seattle (a trip during which they wrote their signature song *Welcome to the Jungle*). Stradlin replaced Guns on guitar, and was joined by UK-born mixed-race Saul Hudson (nicknamed Slash, also on guitar), Seattle-born bassist Michael 'Duff' McKagan, who cut his teeth in the punk scene playing for bands such as Fastback, The Fartz, Ten Minute Warning, and drummer Steven Adler who along with Slash and Duff played in the short-lived Road Crew.

'We actually ran an ad for "heavy metal punk glam guitarist"' explained Axl, "Slash showed up and we said "Nah". But he kept popping up everywhere we were at and all of a sudden we started working together...'

In any other band, each would have been contender for maddest, baddest member but now there were five them all in one place, each with a voracious appetite for drink, drugs, sex and songwriting. On June 1985 Guns N' Roses was born and their classic line-up debuted shortly-afterwards at the legendry Troubadour club.

In the mid-eighties LA already had a strong rock scene, kick-started by the shambolic Motley Crue, whose insatiable appetite for decadence superseded their musical ability. But their outrageous live shows and over the top image (make-up, hairspray, leather, heels) worked and they were already selling millions of records and inspiring a new glut of bands. Alternatively known as 'glam rock', 'sleaze rock', 'hair metal' and many other names, the scene was largely based around the clubs and strip-bars of Sunset Boulevard and included emerging bands such as Warrant, Ratt, Poison, Cinderella, Faster Pussycat, Vixen, Tesla and Winge. These acts emerged from clubs such as The Starwood and The Roxy in the mid/late-eighties to varying degrees of success. At these early stages, Guns N' Roses were outcasts.

'Izzy and I walked into The Roxy one of our first times and I remember [Motley Crue's] Vince Veil and Nikki Sixx leaning over a rail trying to figure out who the fuck we were,' remembered Rose. 'It

took three years to start getting accepted in LA. I remember for two years standing at The Troubadour and people wouldn't talk to me.'

It was into this scene however that Guns N' Roses emerged, looking tougher and more volatile than any of their more feminised contemporaries. Crucially, their songs were far better than everyone else's in the competitive club scene. Guns N' Roses played hard blues, but with the urgent, aggressive delivery of a punk band and Rose's uncompromising and unflinching lyrics written from a street-level.

'There's a lot of violence in the world,' Axl said in an early interview with the *LA Times* in 1986. 'That's the environment we live in and we like to show what we live in rather than hide it and act like everything is nice and sugary. Everybody likes to paint their pretty pictures, but that just ain't how it is. It just seems easier to know the rougher side [of life] than the more pleasant side just because it's more readily accessible.'

Throughout that year they rapidly made giant leaps to become one of the most talked-about new bands, with a strong fan base to match. These club shows were volatile and voluminous affairs, delivered by five surly, sneering young men whose faces gave nothing away behind their fringes, sunglasses and hats. In short, they looked and acted like rock stars from the get-go. At the same time, the band was living communally in a run-down house nicknamed 'The Hell House', a now much mythologised scene of partying, sex and drug use. The band shared women, food, drugs and even clothes.

Thanks to a series of shows in and around LA, in their first year Guns N' Roses grabbed the attention of Geffen Records' Tom Zutaut, who, in a move typical of the highly competitive LA music industry, cleverly told his fellow A&R men that the band 'sucked', in order to sign them himself. It worked and Zutaut immediately handed over the $75,000 advance that Rose had demanded although legend has it that Rose had also told a A&R lady from rival company Chrysalis that Guns N' Roses would sign with her if she walked naked down Sunset Boulevard and that 'for three days, Zutaut

nervously watched from his Sunset office window for a naked A&R executive before he could close the deal.'

One lesser known incident of this time however occurred around this time that nearly killed off the band before they had barely begun when two rape charges were filed against Slash and Rose.

'Everyone was trying to hide it from the record company,' Axl told the *LA Times* in 1986. 'Rape charge? What rape charge?' The charges were dropped eventually, but for a while we had to go into hiding. We had undercover cops and the vice squad looking for us. They were talking a mandatory five years. It kind of settled my hormones for a while."

With such issues resolved and a new manager on board, the band was ready to roll. Not resting on their laurels, they entered Rumble Studios in Canoga Park, California with producer Mike Clink.

The choice of an LA studio was a strategic move on the part of Geffen who originally wanted Bill Price – famous for his engineering work with the likes of Mott The Hoople and Roxy Music, but most notably The Clash and the Sex Pistols - to produce.

'Negotiations were well under way to record at Wessex Studios, in London, and I was really looking forward to doing it,' Price explained in 2001 in an interview for Izzy Stradlin's official website. 'I'd heard demos that sounded great. Then, all of a sudden, Geffen got cold feet. Guns N' Roses was growing a reputation for being quite wild in Los Angeles, and, probably quite rightly, Geffen didn't want them out of their sight. So David Geffen himself insisted that the record was made in Los Angeles...'

With Price unable to record in LA, Clink was brought in. Though a producer with very little experience, Guns N' Roses were similarly a band with everything to prove and creatively they hit it off.

'If you can play your songs good live you don't have any real problems in the studio,' said Izzy of the band's approach at cutting their debut. 'We did the basic tracks in two weeks. We'd have all the amps set up in one room. We had the guitar amps isolated and the

bass direct and Steve's drums were in the room and we played in the room off the drums, putting all the tunes down in two weeks. Once in a while Slash would do a live solo and he usually would go back and re-cut them. Axl got a sore throat so he ended up doing [the vocals] later.'

Aware that they signed one of the most exciting new rock bands on the scene, Geffen wanted to move quickly, and also test the water by introducing the band to a wider public beyond the relatively cliquey LA scene. To do this band and label cobbled together a debut release that highlighted their potential – the *Live?!*@ Like a Suicide* debut EP.

While it's rare for a band to debut with a live record, the four tracks on the EP (early live favourites' *Reckless Life* and *Move to the City*, plus cover versions of Aerosmith's *Mama Kin* and Rose Tattoo's *Nice Boys*) weren't recorded live at all, but instead cut in a studio, with the crowd noises dubbed in afterwards. The reason for this was the first attempt recorded in a club was deemed too bad to release – something Rose himself would later attest to by proclaiming it a 'contrived piece of shit'.

It didn't seem to matter. Clocking in at fourteen minutes in length and limited to 10,000 copies worldwide, *Live?!*@ Like a Suicide* served its purpose by introducing the band to the world. The record cover depicted Rose and McKagan, complete with heavily hair-sprayed Sunset Strip bouffants, in action on stage and lit by red lights which gave them a matching hue. Along with the band's somewhat literal logo (some guns and some, er, roses, intertwined) and a band shot that showed five surly young men resplendent in an array of shades, hats and scarves, it gave an insight into a band and conveyed a strong message: a new bad boy rock bands was in our midst and on the cusp of possible greatness. For added independent credibility, it was released on the Uzi Suicide label – a fake independent label that was essentially Geffen Records in all but name.

Released in December 1986, with little fanfare the record quickly sold well beyond the band's existing Los Angeles fan base and though only a highly limited amount made it in to the UK on import, it was enough to gain the band their first international radio play and press coverage in magazines.

Meanwhile back in the studio the five-piece were laying down the parts for their debut. Though very much a group effort, the songwriting was spread across the members and dated back to before the band had even existed.

Izzy Stradlin contributed *Anything Goes*, *Think About You* and his dark tale of heroin addiction, *Mr Brownstone*, while Duff wrote *Nightrain* and *It's So Easy*. Other songs such as *Rocket Queen* and *Paradise City* were re-worked from initial half-finished collaborative ideas that the band had been toying with over the previous months.

If *Live?!*@ Like a Suicide* was a mere taster for rock fans, then *Appetite for Destruction* was the main course. At a time when rock music was largely about false images, posturing and posing, *Appetite for Destruction* was a highly believable collection and few who heard it could have questioned the authenticity of the subject matter: drugs, prostitutes, poverty – and all set against the gritty backdrop of that great urban, sun-kissed smokescreen, the City of Angels. These were songs that had been lived and were now relayed to the world in unflinching terms. Even at these early stages, the band members were at at varying stages of drug and/or alcohol reliance (Stradlin and Adler favouring heroin, McKagan well on his way to a booze-induced burst liver and Slash with an ever-present bottle of Jack Daniels at his fingertips, which proved to be more than just a photograph prop). Between them they had amassed an impressive charge sheet of petty crimes and misdemeanours. Simply put, they were archetypal rock 'n' roll outlaws who had just recorded the final word on decadence and excess.

But there were heavy streaks of vulnerability, sensitivity and yearning for love in there too, themes that were embedded in lyrically

wistful songs such *Sweet Child o' Mine* or *Think About You*. Songs that would take them from cult club band to mainstream, radio-friendly, genre-transcending superstars. None of these factors – bad boy reputation, lyrical conceits – would have been overly remarkable had the playing throughout not been impeccable. Over twelve songs Slash and Stradlin traded precision guitar lines over a flawlessly tight rhythm section, while Rose showcased a vocal range that was as staggering as it was unique.

However, even before it was released, *Appetite for Destruction* caused controversy on account of its cover image, a disturbing and striking image by acclaimed 'psychedelic' artist Robert Williams that depicted the street rape of a young woman at the hands of a malevolent looking automaton which itself is about to be attacked by a larger, monstrous, mechanical creature. Possibly reasoning that the album was destined to be a moderately successful album within the hard rock genre alone, Geffen initially ran with the band's choice of cover, but when conservative MTV refused to play their music and retail chains such as Wal-Mart refused to stock a record with such a cover, the band were forced to change the cover to a less unnerving and more clichéd heavy metal logo image of the band members heads as skulls that was reminiscent of Iron Maiden's famous 'Eddie' character that adorned their albums and also similar to artwork for bands such as The Grateful Dead.

Appetite for Destruction was released on 21 August 1987. That this band of steel-eyed reprobates had formed, toured, been signed and recorded a debut in a relatively short space of time was impressive, though it was a rapid ascendancy that was initially reflected in the album's sales figures – the band didn't have a huge international following and though critical opinion was generally positive, initial sales were modest.

Then a series of events occurred that changed all that. Key to it all was the airplay the band garnered. Up against a world of bad pop, lightweight rap music and established bands of the day (1987's

biggest sellers included the likes of Whitney Houston and U2) Guns N' Roses appeared to be too small and too edgy, though the biggest album of the year – Bon Jovi's *Slippery When Wet* – at least suggested that there was an audience for rock music, even if it was innocuous.

The album's first single *It's So Easy* had failed to set the charts alight and the follow-up, Welcome to the Jungle wasn't faring much better. Aware that TV and radio exposure were everything to an album's success, label boss David Geffen (who had set up the Geffen label in 1980 with the release of John Lennon's 'Double Fantasy' album just two months before the ex-Beatles was murdered), personally called MTV to request them to play the *Welcome to the Jungle* video. They did – once at 2am – but through word of mouth and a growing interest in the five men enigmatically depicted in the heady video to the album's lead track, within days the song became viewers' most requested track. Despite their initial disapproval of the band, MTV finally acknowledged the appeal of the band and became strong supporters. Sales picked up and the single entered the low-end of the UK single chart.

By August 1988 – one year after its release – *Appetite for Destruction* had sold a very creditable 500000 copies and its creators were enjoying their first flush of wealth.

Not long afterwards, it crept its way to the album top spot in the US and No. 4 in the UK charts. But, most importantly, the record kept selling at an accelerated rate, so much so that by the dawn of the nineties it had topped the ten million mark and to date has now sold over eighteen million copies. It remains the third biggest selling debut album of all time, surpassing debut efforts by the likes of Britney Spears, George Michael, Led Zeppelin etc.

'I think the only reason it could have possibly gone to No. One is we're filling some sort of void,' explained Slash in December of that year. 'That's really the only thing I can attribute it to. It's not because the songs are all huge hits – that's the last thing they are,

they're just a bunch of dirty rock 'n' roll songs. So I figure, we're just like the resident down and dirty rock band in town at the moment. Everybody wants to have that record because it's not really that safe... and it looks cool next to George Michael records in their collection.'

Few rock bands ever make it without getting out there and playing live and Guns N' Roses were no exception. In fact, it was their live shows that truly sold them to the world. Two months before the release of their debut, the band had made their first foray to Europe, where in June 1987, they debuted at the famous Marquee Club in the heart of London. Performing to a few hundred fans, the show was recorded on video and subsequently widely bootlegged – something Axl Rose would surely disapprove of, yet helped build the band's profile at a time when hard rock bands were rarely on TV in the UK. *Kerrang!* magazine however was less than impressed: 'Guns N' Roses blew it, pure and simple,' wrote journalist Xavier Russell, a self-confessed fan of the band's debut EP. 'Some punters down the front obviously saw through the bullshit that was spewing forth and proceeded to spit and throw the odd can of beer at lead singer W. Axl Rose, who returned the compliment by saying, "Fuck you, pussy". Here was a band that has just made a truly wonderful album – the up and coming *Appetite for Destruction*, which I love – yet at the same time it's sad they just couldn't reproduce that rawness live...'

Though the UK press initially treated Guns N' Roses harshly (it was not uncommon for Slash to be called 'Slosh') such reviews hardly mattered – what was important was the band was out there and being written about. And such negative reviews were very much in the minority as the band found favour with new fans, many of whom had hitherto never been into hard rock music. This new-found popularity lay in their ability to unite not only fans of Bon Jovi and the emerging thrash metal scene as epitomised by Metallica and Slayer, but also pop fans who liked a nice ballad.

Throughout 1988 the band toured and toured – including a successful stint opening for a revitalised Aerosmith, swiftly moving

from clubs to arenas and, soon, stadiums. Their album was now being measured in millions rather than thousands of copies. And all the while the band were living the type of lifestyle they were accustomed to – partying, girls, drink and drugs.

'That was a point where we were on tour with Aerosmith, and David Geffen flew out to a gig and he says, "You guys are rich and famous now,"' remembered Stradlin. 'And we were like, "We are?! We're still living in a tour bus and in hotels, so what's the difference?"'

An affirmation of the band's status as the world's biggest – and, as the tabloids would have it, most dangerous band – came when the band joined the likes of Iron Maiden and Kiss on the 1988 bill of the UK's famed Donnington festival. Amongst the older rock mainstays Guns N' Roses were the hot new band and for many this was the first chance to see them live.

'British crowds tend to be more hectic, more insane,' Slash told one interviewer, backstage. 'That's the big difference. I think the Brits are more starved for it. They have to go through more hell with life in general. In America, everybody just gets into it because they want to have a good time. In England, they're desperate for it because the rest of life on the average is pretty screwed up...'

When the band hit the stage, Slash's prediction seemed somewhat chilling as the 100,000 crowd surged with unprecedented levels of excitement. Tragically two fans were killed in the crush. Unaware of what was happening, the band carried on playing – something that the media crucified them over. If evidence was needed that Guns N' Roses were the biggest thing in music then this, sadly, was it.

No-one can be trained for the type of stratospheric success that Guns N' Roses saw in 1988–1989 and each band member handled it differently, withdrawing into their own little worlds defined by their own preferred intoxicants (though Slash revealed the band were still on a set wage of $100 per week). Increasingly, they were being viewed as caricatures – and in many ways, they were. Slash was the

aloof guitar hero, complete with hair, curls, blank expression and ever present bottle of JD and Marlboro hanging from his lips, Axl the volatile, limelight-loving aggressor... and so on.

But the band was simply too successful and too busy to stop and address their growing problems. It was a work schedule that intensified with the release of *G N' R Lies* (also more commonly known simply as *Lies*) in November 1988. Though the album debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard charts (and has now sold well over twelve million copies), containing a mere eight songs, it was nevertheless undeniably a stop-gap release just as *Live?!*@ Like a Suicide* had been. In fact it was this live EP that comprised the first side, while the second introduced four new, acoustic-based songs that showed a more sensitive, songwriting side to the band.

Well, that was the plan anyway. In fact, lead acoustic track *One in a Million* stirred more controversy than the band could imagined, thanks to lyrics that were unabashedly offensive to many. The key lines were: 'Police and niggers, that's right/Get out of my way' and – even more ridiculous: 'Immigrants and faggots, they make no sense to me/They come to our country and think they'll do as they please/Like start some mini Iran/Or spread some fucking disease'. Axl claimed that these prejudiced sentiments weren't necessarily his but whichever way you look at it, he was utterly misguided in assuming people would get what he was talking about. Whether his opinions or that or assumed third person narrative, his words cut a little too close to the bone and *Lies* was widely criticised for this song alone. Axl vaguely defended himself by saying he was fan of overtly homosexual performers such as Elton John and Freddie Mercury and that Ice-T's black rap-rock Body Count had opened for Guns... but then isn't that the standard bigot's retort – '... but some of my best friends are black/gay/whatever'?

'When Axl first came up with the song and really wanted to do it, I said I didn't think it was very cool,' said Slash who, lest we forget, is of mixed-race parentage. 'But Axl gets very adamant about expressing

himself, and his lyrics are very direct. He's very honest, and he's got his reasons. I don't regret doing *One in a Million*, I just regret what we've been through because of it and the way people have perceived our personal feelings.'

Once again Guns N' Roses received the type of publicity their record company could have done without, though it was they who gave the record the green light so perhaps they too should have been accountable rather than merely Rose himself, who has never fully explained the intention of the song. Yet, as was becoming the way, the album kept selling...

Such scrutiny and negative publicity merely added to Guns N' Roses' ever-expanding reputation as the bad boy band of choice. And they had the appetites to match.

In October 1989, while supporting the Rolling Stones at the Los Angeles Coliseum, Rose issued the warning that unless 'certain people got their shit together', then they would go their separate way – or would just plain be ousted from the band. Without being too specific, many knew that he was referring to the heroin addiction that had gripped Slash, Stradlin and Adler.

'I was at the tail end of a really, really serious heroin problem,' Slash told *Rolling Stone*. 'I felt the band had to do the Stones gigs to bring us back together. We were all living in our separate houses, no one saw anybody, I was doing my thing, and only three of us were going to rehearsals on a regular basis... I made an agreement with the band that after the Stones shows were over, I'd clean up.'

'Let's say he can pronounce his syllables better now,' said Izzy of his guitar-slinging partner in an interview with *Mojo* magazine after they had cleaned up. 'Fuck, he was a mess. He's a great guy an' all, but he can't monitor his own intake, with the result that he's always fuckin' up big-time. Like leaving dope hanging out on the table when the police come to call, nodding out into his food in restaurants – shit like that. I love the guy a lot, but the fact is, man, Slash is not what you'd call your thinking man's drug-user. He's real careless, doing

really shitty things like OD-ing a lot in other people's apartments. A lot.'

The band was riding high though – literally – and at the dawn of a new decade they entered the studio to ostensibly write and record their first new (non-acoustic) material in three years.

What followed was some of the most ambitious, pompous music created within hard rock and the band soon unveiled a grandiose plan to release the music from these fruitful months as not one, but two double-albums: *Use Your Illusion I* and *Use Your Illusion II*. But for now they were just concentrating on the creative (rather than marketing) process and were writing literally dozens of new songs, ranging from soft blues to ballads to some of their hardest music yet – plus numerous cover versions, recorded across six different studios.

'The biggest thing we had to deal with was, like, the follow up thing, right?' Said Slash shortly after the album's release. 'And we're like "Ah, fuck, we don't care." But finally, we were off the road and it was time to go back into the studio, people were trying to put really heavy pressure on us. And it did start turning into pressure. Even [Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler] goes "Is there another *Welcome to the Jungle* on it?" And I was like, "Of all people to ask me that!" And at that point, we just cut off from everybody. You know, "We're gonna do our record." And that's what we did.'

At this point Stradlin and Slash had got clean (though the latter was drinking two bottles of Jack Daniels per night), but Adler was struggling. During recordings his inability to keep time caused the band to have to record their epic *Civil War* song thirty times. In the end it was too much and in August 1990, Adler was dismissed from the band. It was the end of the classic Guns N' Roses line-up as the world new it and in many ways they were never be the same band again.

'He's probably a misunderstood genius,' Steven Adler later told *Classic Rock* magazine of their frontman, who was increasingly taking charge of the band's major decisions. 'I don't know. Axl doesn't think

far ahead enough [to be a visionary]. Like, "If I do this, so and so will happen." He's definitely a great lyricist. But the thing people forget is that Slash, Duff, Izzy and I wrote the music – sometimes Axl wasn't even at rehearsal and we just gave him a tape. For the longest time I had no clue what he was singing on our first EP.'

'Steven is about as rock 'n' roll a personality as you can get,' said Slash, a man no stranger to hedonism himself. 'All he lived for was sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll – in that order. Maybe drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll. Then it was drugs and rock 'n' roll. Then it was just drugs.'

After trying out various replacements, the band settled on The Cult's Matt Sorum, who they had seen playing a few months earlier. With Sorum on board, the band continued recording the bulk of their two new albums.

'The fact that Matt could play and fit in was what saved us,' said Slash. 'If we hadn't found somebody, it would have ultimately been the demise of the band. Matt's been capable of keeping up with it, if not enhancing it totally and bringing new stuff to it. He still can't show up anywhere on time, though.'

The band also added a keyboard player, Dizzy Reed, to augment their sound. Reed had previously been in The Wild, who rehearsed next door to the first Guns N' Roses line-up and was drafted in by Axl – now they were six. During this time they also changed management.

With millions of albums sold and the band, commercially at least, on top of the world, this was a time of musical freedom. If one word sums up the mindset of the band at the time it would be 'indulgence'. But recordings in 1990 and into 1991 were far from smooth, the band members existing even further in their own worlds and communication at a minimum – something confirmed by British engineer Bill Price, who was flown into LA to mix the many tracks recorded.

'I decided that the only way to find out which tracks to use would be to get the entire band in the studio at the same time, which seemed like quite a normal thing to me,' Price explained in 2001.

'When I mentioned this to the band's management, they were totally horrified. The thought of Guns N' Roses all being in the same room at the same time was too much for them to bear. [Laughs.] They warned me against it, but I couldn't think of any other way of doing it. So they all arrived, and we got down to a mix. They were very gentlemanly. Axl walked in and said, "Good afternoon, Slash. I know it's your guitar, and obviously you have the main say in it, but I do love that lick there. Do you think we could have it a bit louder?" Total gentlemen. We finally got the mix done...'

Finally, in summer 1991, as American radio was being increasingly dominated by emerging Seattle trio Nirvana – a band who were matching Guns N' Roses in terms of far-reaching, seemingly overnight success – the *Use Your Illusion* albums were completed.

Nirvana and the many bands associated with the grunge scene that spawned them – bands such as Mudhoney and Tad, and emerging acts such as Pearl Jam – heralded a return to a more down-to-earth approach where frontmen weren't excessive preening stars, but everyday men with the same type of problems, anxieties and unease as the world and most people.

Image-wise there was also a lack of glamour, Kurt Cobain and co wearing the same clothes they had always worn – old torn jeans, flannel plaid work shirts, beat-up sneakers. Like seventies punk before it, it was music with a distinct lack of pretension that highlighted the bigger, more established rock bands of the day – as epitomised by Guns N' Roses – to be a collective of fevered-egos who had long since lost touch with reality. Feeling under threat from these newcomers, that were creating some of the most brilliantly invigorating music in years, the coming couple of years saw Axl Rose react by becoming even more tyrannical and dictatorial than he had already been. He was often petty with it too, seizing control of the band, both creatively and financially.

On 16 September Guns N' Roses' audacious four-sided package was released and both went straight to the top of the album

charts, each going on to sell a very impressive seven million copies each.

However, critical opinion was mixed. Many pointed that the band had wandered a little too willingly into pomp-rock territory and had lost the grittiness of old. And they had. But that didn't seem to affect tickets sales as they embarked upon a huge world tour.

'We're very proud of what we've done,' Axl later said of *Use Your Illusion*. 'We didn't know that it would include quite as many songs, but we knew we had to bury *Appetite for Destruction* in some way. There was no way to out-do that album, and if we didn't out-do *Appetite* one way or another, it was going to take away from our success and the amount of power we had gained to do what we wanted. We got all the material we needed to out of our system, and commercially it's been a major success.'

The success of Guns N' Roses new albums and this attendant tour marked another turning point for the band. New fans came in and old songs went out. It was now not uncommon to see Axl mordantly plucking out a ballad on his piano while dressed in a bizarre mix of tight white cycling shorts, big boots and/or tartan kilt, or endless soloing from Slash, who was now being widely recognised as one of the best guitarists of his generation – always cool, but increasingly overblown.

Suddenly 'the most dangerous band in the world' tag just didn't seem to apply and up against a new wave of more believable, credible bands who were mixing metal and punk and – like the seventies punks before them – openly mocking the elevated positions of the rock stars of the day, Guns N' Roses had made the transition from the underground to the mainstream to the establishment.

On tour, they were beginning to travel separately – a combination of personality clashes and, shall we say, 'chemical differences'. Like the multi-million selling rock Gods before them – Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath etcetera – they were becoming ever-more detached from reality.

But most worryingly of all, was Axl Rose's ego that had reached new levels of delusion. Rumours abounded throughout the rock world about the volatile redhead: Axl has a spiritualist who guided his every decision, Axl had bought out the name of the band and was now the sole owner (both true at various points in the early nineties), Axl had beaten up his girlfriend.

On a mundane level, the frontman was making ridiculous demands and had taken to turning up late for shows, keeping thousands of people waiting night after night.

'We try to approach each one as a unique event – almost like it was our last show,' explained Slash, democratically at the time. 'It's hard to regulate something like that. It's hard to say that it will start exactly at 9pm. When we started going on stage late, the audience initially wondered what the hell was going on. Then it became part of the event. They knew we would either play an incredibly long set, or maybe just eight songs and leave. Our shows have the potential to be rowdy or completely calm. People come prepared for anything – but they always know it's going to be real. I can't fake it. Most musicians have a 'show-must-go-on attitude', and I can hang with that to a certain extent, but I can't fake it.'

A typical example of their frontman's behaviour occurred during a show at the Riverport Amphitheatre, just outside of St. Louis, Missouri on 2 July 1991. During the performance Axl took umbrage at a fan in the front row taking photos of him – hardly a terrible offence – and after asking the security to remove the offender instead took a dramatic, mid-song swan-dive into the crowd where he attempted to remove the camera and punch an audience member. Climbing back onto the stage he announced, 'Thanks to the lame-ass security, I'm going home.' Before petulantly slamming down his microphone with a lid bang (which some people thought was the sound of a gun shot) and storming off stage. Bewildered, his band – because of such antics Guns N' Roses were becoming known as Axl's backing band – sheepishly and reluctantly followed suit.

VICTORY OR DEATH

The crowd of thousands that had paid good money was far from happy and their boos and missiles quickly turned to a full-scale attempt to destroy the venue, bombarding the stage with anything they could get their hands on. Unable to calm the fevered crowd, the security were forced backstage as a full riot ensued. Meanwhile Axl was in a limo, half-way to the state border. In the aftermath, the singer was charged with incitement to riot in his absence, though he wasn't arrested until a year later as the band was touring overseas. A judge then ruled that Rose – in court in a pink Versace suit, no less – was not guilty of directly inciting the riot, though if there was a law against being an asshole then he had surely broken it. Some quite hilarious footage of the incident and the resultant riot can be viewed on Youtube. Despite previous claims, the band was far from clean-living and partying just as hard as ever.

'These guys, they still drink, they still party,' said Stradlin – the only member fully drink and drug-free. 'Probably way too much for their own good. Fuck, these guys like to trash the fuck out of themselves...'

Such high drama, prima donna behaviour and excess became too much for Axl's oldest pal who quit the band in November 1991, midway through their world tour. Gone was the gang of 1987, in their place a disparate set of musicians intent on keeping the show on the road, with only three of the original members now remaining – Rose, Slash and McKagen. To the cooler, more sussed rock fans, Guns N' Roses were becoming something of a running joke, a self-parody, a band drunk on their own success.

Drafted into replace the ever-enigmatic Stradlin was the guitarist Gilby Clarke, formerly of Kill for Thrills.

'When Kills For Thrills got a record deal it was post-Guns N' Roses,' explained Clarke. 'It was 1988 and Guns N' Roses was already becoming big. I had a four piece rock band. We got a major label deal and we only had seven songs. Seven! They [the labels] were so starved to get another big rock band from California. It

actually kind of fucked things up because my band wasn't really ready yet...'

'We knew Gilby when me and Axl were in Hollywood Rose and he was in his other band,' said Slash. 'He was a cool guy then but I hadn't talked to him in all these years that Guns N' Roses had been together. [Before Gilby] I discreetly went through, like, fifteen guitar players trying to find somebody to do the spot because we only had three weeks before the first show...'

Also added to the line-up were a brass section and a number of backing singers.

As 1991 bled into 1992, back on the road road-fatigue was kicking in. An interview with Slash revealed the mind-set of the time.

'You do what you have to do and just keep going,' he explained. 'That's survival. It gets frustrating because you always wonder, "Is there ever going to be a break? Is there ever going to be a cruise period?" But I really think we're blessed. Losing both Izzy and Steven were the biggest tests we could possibly face. Because we're such a tight family, losing two members was really traumatic – yet we somehow survived. That was the be-all, end-all obstacle. As Spinal Tap as it may seem, we are still real people, and it was incredibly personal.'

In April the band was invited to take part in The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS awareness (slightly ironic given Axl's previous comments on homosexuality) at Wembley Stadium. There they performed *Paradise City* and *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, before Axl duetted with his hero Elton John on *Bohemian Rhapsody* and sang on *We Will Rock You* in Queen. The frontman was then joined by Slash and Duff for a collective show-closing rendition of *We Are The Champions*.

This, possibly more than any other moment, was when Guns N' Roses became a mainstream, commercial band, their 'dangerous' reputation diluted and dissolved once for all. Which isn't to say they were able to stay out of trouble – far from it, in fact. The

extensive Use Your Illusion Tour saw the band reaching new levels of jet-setting indulgence, opulence and frankly absurd situations. Across Europe throughout the summer, Axl was prone to affectionately baiting his crowds. In Prague he opened a show by yelping 'Okay, you ex-Commie bastards, get ready to rock!' Whilst in Germany he opted for 'OK, you beer swilling, Merc' driving mugs...'

Another day, another riot... this time it was at a show in Montreal in August, where Guns N' Roses were heading a joint tour with Metallica in what was one of the great rock/metal pairings of the day on a tour that spanned the globe during the summer of 1992 (Soundgarden also opened many of the shows).

After Metallica's set was cut short due to frontman James Hetfield receiving burns from a pyrotechnics accident, Guns N' Roses also terminated their set after nine songs when Rose complained of having a sore throat – an announcement he allegedly made with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of wine in the other (though the band were purportedly dissatisfied with the onstage sound). Again, fans reacted badly to this perceived lack of respect to their hard-earned dollars and subsequently aired their dissatisfaction by rioting. Cars were over-turned, fires were started windows were smashed and shops were looted as the Canadian authorities did what they could to pacify the angry mob.

Of course, blame for such actions couldn't be entirely laid at the feet of Rose, though his judgement after the St. Louis incident proved to be frustratingly short-sighted.

But such was the world Guns N' Roses were living in. Five years after the release of their debut album and they were bigger than ever, a huge live draw in every country they played and, to many, still the last word in rebellious rock 'n' roll. They could do no wrong... for now. But it couldn't last – as the world soon saw, a band can only make increasingly outrageous demands and expect near-diplomatic impunity if they are active, touring and selling. In short, so long as

they're earning, they have the support of lawyers and their record company. Which, for the moment, Guns N' Roses were. But only just...

The differences between eighties kings Guns N' Roses and the new (albeit reluctant) nineties challengers Nirvana was illustrated when the band's two frontmen met backstage at the MTV Awards in September. Guns N' Roses were there to perform a version of their over-long pomp-rock epic *November Rain* with Elton John, after which Rose and Cobain nearly came to blows. Accounts of what happened vary, but it is believed Rose reacted badly when Cobain's wife and Hole singer Courtney Love had jokingly asked Axl if he wanted to be godfather to their child Frances Bean Cobain. He responded by turning to Cobain and saying, 'You shut your bitch up or I'm taking you down to the pavement!' – a threat of a fight, basically. The slight Cobain then turned to Love and said 'Shut up bitch!' At which the Nirvana camp burst into laughter at his neat diffusion of a situation, much to the chagrin of a red-faced Rose. After such a childish and public display of poor behaviour, few sympathised with him.

The Guns N' Roses/Metallica globe-trotting world tour finally ended in Seattle in December 1992. It had been an eventful long-haul, but a mere six weeks later the band were out on their own for an eventful tour of South America. This time they fled Venezuela hours before a military coup, played eventful rain-soaked shows in Brazil and Columbia (the later played after the collapse of the venue's ceiling) and ewere subject to drug busts in Chile.

They keep touring into 1993 – Australia, the Far East, then back to the States. A show in Atlanta, Georgia was cancelled due to an incident which occurred there back in 1987, when Axl was arrested for reacting to security beating up friends of the band in the audience. Already on parole, Guns N' Roses' management decide to avoid further trouble in the town. 'I'm not willing to be a sitting duck for the police,' said Axl, 'I'm familiar with that experience.'

Then it was back East for big shows in unlikely countries such as Turkey and Israel – though gigs in Moscow were cancelled due to the turbulent political situation. Two years in and the band were still on the road, this time supported by suicidal Tendencies and Queen guitarist Brian May – Sweden, Norway, Germany, Switzerland back to the UK, Italy, Spain and on and on. Finally in June 1993, the longest tour in rock history ended. Guns N' Roses had performed 192 dates in twenty-seven countries to over seven million fans.

Though they possibly didn't realise it at the time, the band had peaked. After such a monumental tour, the band released a damp squib of a record at the close of 1993 – a collection of (largely uninspired punk rock) cover versions, called *The Spaghetti Incident?*. Slash explained the idea behind the release: 'We were in the studio doing *Use Your Illusion*. All the basic tracks were done, but after thirty-something-odd songs, we still felt like playing. As a warm-up in the studio, we usually jam on tunes we know. We thought it would be cool if we released a bunch of songs that were true to our hearts. Everything was recorded live... we did seven in one day, four in another.'

You could tell. 'The record wasn't thought out too much and it wasn't supposed to be taken so seriously,' added the guitarist. 'To us it was like a joke. I have no idea how the general public is going to react, although it is very aggressive, and people usually like it when you say "fuck you" on a record.'

Even this innocuous album managed to cause controversy due to the unmarked inclusion of hidden track *Look at Your Game Girl*, written by convicted murdered Charles Manson and a song whose inclusion some of the band members opposed (though ironically it was one of the better songs on the album).

'We didn't want to put its title and Charlie Manson's name on the record.' Explained Slash of the song's omission from the track-listing. 'None of us are into that for a serial killer's sake. We didn't want to give him the credit. Except for that song's context, it's the antithesis

of everything else on the record. It's so mellow. That's the great thing about the record. We didn't pick a bunch of similar-sounding slamming songs...'

Despite its daft title, literal artwork and general lack of bite to the music, the album was met fairly favourably by certain quarters of the music press.

Incidentally, the band remained tight-lipped about the inspiration for the album's title though some have suggested the original 'spaghetti incident' may have involved heroin, Steven Adler (in a related note, after a court-ruling in 1992 the former drummer received a $2.5 million share of the reported $650 million the band had earned in their seven years of existence.)

The Spaghetti Incident? marked the true beginning of the creative disintegration of Guns N' Roses as we knew them. Though the band still featured core members Rose, Slash and McKagen – the spirit and songwriting core of the band – they were entering into a period of dissatisfaction and turmoil, from which they never really recovered.

There was a specific series of incidents occurred that weakened their resolve, the first of which came when Gilby Clarke was dismissed from the band in 1994. Though he had contributed to no new recordings beyond the cover versions, he had become an integral part of Guns N' Roses on their world tour. The reasons given for his dismissal were that Axl didn't think his songwriting skills were good enough for future projects; though his solo album *Pawnshop Guitars* of that year may have also been a factor. Either way it was one more strategic move on Rose's part, in which loyalty just didn't feature and which indicated the power that he now wielded over all group decisions.

'My leaving was a strange thing.' Clarke explained in 2002. 'I left and was fired at the same time. I didn't want to go along with the program. When Axl called me about the direction of the band he wanted to take, I voiced my opinion. I said, "I think this is a great

hard rock band and I think we should continue that." He didn't agree with me. I said, "Look, if it is a hard rock band then I am in, but if you are going to have three or four guitar players then I am out." Then I was out. I kind of made my statement and lived by it.'

Clarke's final contribution to the band was on another cover version – this time of the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* for the *Interview With a Vampire* soundtrack. Though the song featured heavily in the film, yet it was a poor interpretation of a song whose original couldn't really be bettered. The fact that Guns had more faith in others' songs over their own was another bad sign.

Clarke was replaced by Axl's friend Paul Tobias (also known as Paul Huge) who had known Axl for a long time. Because the band weren't touring at that moment his induction into the band took place over time. Initially he was drafted in to help write songs and wasn't confirmed as an official member for some years. Though Rose publicly credited Tobias in 2001 as being instrumental in holding the band (what band?) together, both Slash and Sorum are on record as saying his involvement had some bearing upon them leaving the group. Tobias' playing on *Sympathy for the Devil* seemed nothing but an attempt to ape Slash's style, mixed in over the top of the original guitarist's part. Slash was reportedly far from happy.

1994–1995 was a fallow period creatively that eventually led to the departure of Slash and McKagen. It was in 1994 that the lifestyle of the band's bassist caught up with him when his pancreas exploded due to alcoholism. McKagen underwent emergency surgery and was given a month to live unless he cleaned up – advice he thankfully heeded.

Though Slash didn't leave the band until 1996, and McKagen opted out of his band contract in 1997, the years prior to their leaving were full of frustrations. Frustrations caused by disjointed jam sessions, start-stop writing periods (in which Slash left and re-joined the band), bad business dealings, delays and – of course – the megalomaniacal tendencies of their frontman.

'I don't think I would be real happy and real stable right now had I not done this tour and got away from what seems to me to be starting to establish itself as the classic, bloated, over-the-top, self-indulgent rock band.' Reflected Slash in 1995, as he launched his side-project band Slash's Snakepit.

Slash and the booze-free McKagen, embarked upon new projects – the latter formed Neurotic Outsiders with Matt Sorum, John Taylor of Duran Duran and the Sex Pistols' Steve Jones. This did little to help the speculation that Guns N' Roses were very much in decline. Both toured and released records and to all intents and purposes, by 1996 Guns N' Roses were all but over. Slash and Duff kept busy, but Guns N' Roses disappeared off the radar.

What followed was five years of enigmatic silence from Axl Rose and his remaining band, punctuated only by snippets of information regarding the increasingly reclusive singer.

Brought into replace Slash – a near-impossible task – was guitarist Robin Finck, formerly a touring member of Trent Reznor's industrial figureheads Nine Inch Nails and guitarist for popular circus troupe Cirque du Soleil.

Such was the world Rose was now operating in, that Finck was contracted to join the band for two years yet in 1998 he left after he had served his time, and still there was no sign of a new record forthcoming. This calculated, business-like approach on Rose's part did little to help the band's creativity and was the band's undoing – the only song recorded during this time was *Oh My God*, released for the 1999 soundtrack of the movie *End of Days*.

'I'd helped write and arrange and recorded enough songs for several records.' Said Finck after his departure in an interview that provided a peep-hole into the world of *Chinese Democracy*. 'Honestly, we recorded so many different song ideas and completed so many different types of songs – from quiet, very simple traditional piano songs to sixteen-stereo tracks of keyboard blur, and everything in between. It was great for a while, but then it became terribly

frustrating never seeing anything completed because no lyrics were finished. No one song was ever completed and I was there for two and a half years.'

The guitarist later re-joined Nine Inch Nails, before rejoining Guns N' Roses in 2001.

And at this point details get messy.

As early as 1994, Rose was working on new songs but went on something of a hiatus until 1998, whereupon he returned to the studio with a variety of musicians to work on the band's new album, titled *Chinese Democracy*.

The line-up featured numerous excellent musicians, including bassist Tommy Stinson formerly of key eighties alternative band the Replacements, drummer Josh Freese of the Vandals (and one of the most in-demand session drummers), though – as is evident – a collective of great musicians doesn't necessarily made for a great bands, nor does a dictator inspire great loyalty. Freese (a product of the US punk scene) stuck it out until 2000, before leaving. Jane's Addiction (and ex-Red Hot Chili Peppers) guitarist Dave Navarro played on *End of Days* but wasn't a permanent member of the band.

In fact, no-one seemed permanent as more members came and went and the world's media began to wonder whether the increasingly-delayed equivalent of the Beach Boys fraught *Smile* album in the sixties would ever be released. In 1997, Axl bought the rights to the name *Guns N' Roses*, effectively making them/him a one-man band. Tellingly, in 1999 Axl also told MTV that he had re-recorded *Appetite for Destruction* which begged the question, 'Why?'

Suddenly it was late 2000 – a new millennium – and Guns N' Roses announced that they were to finally play some shows eight years since their last proper tour. On 1 January 2000, the all-new band played at the House of Blues in Las Vegas, before heading to Brazil to play in front of 200000 people at the third Rock in Rio festival. The line-up now featured acclaimed avant-garde guitarist Buckethead – noticeable for his unconventional, progressive style

and for wearing an upturned KFC bucket on his head, ex-Primus drummer Bryan Mantia and Finck, back in the fold again.

As if pre-empting criticisms during the Rio show, Axl said, 'I know that many of you are disappointed that some of the people you came to know and love could not be with us here today. Regardless of what you have heard or read, people worked very hard (meaning my former friends) to do everything they could so that I could not be here today. I say fuck that. I am as hurt and disappointed as you that unlike Oasis, we could not find a way to all get along.'

Though reasonably well-received, the band didn't play any further shows until August 2002 when they headlined a number of festivals in both Europe and Asia, including the UK's Reading Festival. However when Axl Rose failed to show up to the opening night of the US/Canadian leg of the tour in Vancouver fans reacted by (yes, you've guessed it) going on the rampage. Axl's explanation on a subsequent radio interview was suitably vague. 'I was in the air, I was in a plane on the way to the show,' he said, 'It gets complicated. The manager of the building said that the doors wouldn't open 'till he had confirmation that we were wheels up, that the plane was in the air. And as soon as he had that confirmation, he cancelled the show without telling anybody. And not only did he cancel the show, he cancelled the show and before this – I don't know if it was a riot or a disturbance, whatever – started, they had police at the airport trying to find out what was going on with me. So, it's all kind of screwy.'

When a second riot followed in Philadelphia for much the same no-show reasons, the band's promoters scrapped the rest of the tour, leaving even more fans disappointed. Guns N' Roses had done little to redeem themselves after a lengthy absence.

Frustrated, guitarist Paul Tobias quit the band and was replaced by Richard Fortus, formerly of the Psychedelic Furs.

Don't worry if you're having trouble keeping up with the ever-changing personnel; by 2002 even Guns N' Roses managers weren't sure who was in the band. Meanwhile Slash, Duff and Matt Sorum

were putting their former singer to fame by forming the Guns N' Roses-esque Velvet Revolver with Stone Temple Pilots' Scott Weiland on vocals. They were doing rather well with it too.

It's hard to imagine that Geffen Records were pleased with the way things had turned out. Though the band made them huge sums of money between 1987–1992, there had been no new material released. Despite this, to date *Chinese Democracy* had cost $13 million, easily making it the most expensive unreleased album. One attempt to claw back some of the costs came with the release of a *Greatest Hits* package, released in May 2004. Skipping over the band's earlier – and, creatively-speaking, best years – the collection was pretty awful, not least as four out of the fourteen songs were cover versions. It sold well, reaching No. 1 in the UK and No. 3 in the US, but fans and critics alike pointed out that this had been a poor representation of the band's solid body of work. Even the band disowned it – both Rose and former members taking legal action to prevent its release. That same month the band was due to play Rock in Rio once again, but guitarist Buckethead decided to leave this time (later to be replaced by Ron 'Bumblefoot' Thal). The band cancelled...

It was the same general air of inconsistency that Guns N' Roses maintained. In 2006 they announced they would be touring again and this time played their longest run of shows in some time. They headlined the UK's Download festival and the Portuguese version of Rock In Rio, after a series of warm-up shows in the States. Again, the shows were reasonably well received though were accompanied by the usual antics of turning up late on stage, cancelling some shows and Axl getting arrested in Sweden at 8am following an altercation with a hotel security guard.

Joining them were Papa Roach and Skid Row's Sebastian Bach, who opened some shows and appeared with the band on some songs, as did Izzy Stradlin. Though various new songs were leaked on the internet and *Chinese Democracy* was scheduled, then subsequently

cancelled more times than people could keep up with, no new material hit the streets.

In 2007 more dates were announced with the first leg of the Chinese Democracy World Tour set to visit Japan, Thailand, South Africa, South America, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. At this time Guns N' Roses was listed as featuring Axl Rose on vocals, Robin Finck, Ron Thal and Richard Fortus on guitars, Tommy Stinson on bass, Dizzy Reed and Chris Pitman on keyboards and Frank Ferrer on drums.

Disappointingly the proposed release date for the album (March 2007) came and went, by which point fans were getting increasingly irate. Some devoted fan sites shut down in protest at this endless procrastination and at Axl Rose's assumption that he could toy with his fan base indefinitely.

'To say the making of this album has been an unbearably long and incomprehensible journey would be an understatement.' Axl said in an open letter to the fans, issued in December 2006. 'Overcoming the endless and seemingly insane number of obstacles faced by all involved, notwithstanding the emotional challenges endured by everyone – the fans, the band, our road crew and business team – has at many times seemed like a bad dream in which one wakes up only to find that they are still in the nightmare. Unfortunately, this time it has been played out for over a decade in real life... In the end, it's just an album, but it's one that I, the band, our record company and all involved believe and feel is a true Guns N' Roses album. Ultimately, the public will decide, and regardless of the outcome, our hearts, lives and our passion has been put into this project every step of the way.'

Chinese Democracy, was finally released on 22 November 2008, in Europe and Australia. Then in North America on 3 November 2008, and in the United Kingdom on 24 November 2008. By this point the album had racked up an incredible $14 million in production costs, making it the most expensive rock album to ever be produced.

2009 began with rumours circulating that Guns N' Roses would perform in Spain and Italy during June, and continued through the year with comments from Irving Azoff about a summer stadium tour but nothing emerged. This continued until in November, when it was finally announced that Guns N' Roses would play four dates in Asia and thirteen in Canada. More dates were added later for South America and Europe.

In true chaotic Guns N' Roses style, a cancellation notice for the remaining shows of the tour was posted on Rose's Twitter account on 15 August 2010. The statement was later be refuted by Guns N' Roses official PR, who claimed that Axl's account had been hacked, and that the band would in fact continue the tour.

Towards the end of the European leg, Duff McKagan joined Guns N' Roses onstage for the first time in seventeen years on 14 October, playing bass on *You Could Be Mine* and guitar on *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, *Nice Boys* and *Patience* at London's O2 Arena. The appearance was said to be a spur-of-the-moment decision, as he and Rose happened to be staying in the same hotel. Rose told the audience, 'There was this guy at the end of my hallway playing all this loud music and shit. What the fuck? Oh – it's Duff!' McKagan later joined Guns N' Roses on part of its tour for two Seattle shows in December 2011, as well as opening for Guns N' Roses with his band Loaded.

Although appearing with Duff pointed toward a reunion of the classic Guns N' Roses line-up, at this point Rose was still sticking to his 2009 comments regarding reuniting with Slash: 'What's clear is that one of the two of us will die before a reunion and however sad, ugly or unfortunate anyone views it, it is how it is. Those decisions were made a long time ago and reiterated year after year by one man.'

Rose continued to fan the flames of animosity with Slash and his other ex-bandmates, when he pulled out of Guns N' Roses' induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the last minute in April 2012. With Axl absent, the former Guns N' Roses members Slash, Duff McKagan, Gilby Clarke, Steven Adler and Matt Sorum

all reunited at the ceremony and performed *Mr. Brownstone*, *Sweet Child o' Mine*, and *Paradise City* with Alter Bridge and Slash's band vocalist Myles Kennedy in Rose's place.

Slash mentioned in an interview, 'All things considered, I don't think any of us wanted to be a part of it initially, didn't think any of us were going to go. It was a thorn in everybody's – well, at least a thorn in my side – because I was busy doing other stuff. When it finally came down to the wire at the very, very, very last-minute – I'm talking about the eleven hours and thirty seconds mark – Axl had pulled out.'

In August 2013, a new song titled *Going Down* was leaked online. The track features bassist Tommy Stinson on lead vocals, with Rose providing backing vocals. Fans hoped this was an indication that new Guns N' Roses material was on the way, and in 2014 many statements to this effect were made. Axl stated, 'We recorded a lot of things before *Chinese Democracy* was out. We've worked more on some of those things and we've written a few new things. But basically, we have what I call kind of the second half of *Chinese Democracy*. That's already recorded. And then we have a remix album made of the songs from *Chinese Democracy*. That's been done for a while, too.'

Keyboardist Dizzy Reed mentioned that the next album was 'close to being done' in July 2014, adding that it was 'just a matter of picking out which songs will be on it' and that the band had a 'shitload of songs, enough to make up another record or two'. Later that month, guitarist Richard Fortus discussed the band working on new material and taking a break from touring. In 2015, Fortus discussed a potential 2016 tour and mentioned that the next album would be released by then. Reed responded by saying, 'When will it come out? We just don't know yet. Only Axl knows, and he's very secretive. Be patient.'

Unfortunately there was not enough patience in the world to save this Guns N' Roses line-up and the group collapsed in 2015. The

NEVER TOO YOUNG TO DIE.

guitarist DJ Ashba left the band in July 2015, just a week later, music journalist Gary Graff reported that a 'confirmed source within the band' had told him that Ron Thal was no longer in Guns N' Roses and had left after the 2014 tour, but no official announcement from Thal or the band was made regarding his status. Tommy Stinson was the next to go, citing personal reasons keeping him unable to tour.

Frank Ferrer clarified the confusing status of the band in mid-2015, saying 'Guns N' Roses still exist... there are a lot of moving parts, and there's a lot of things in the works... everything is moving forward.'

This was certainly true, and in December 2015 it was revealed that the long-awaited reunion with Slash was taking place. Guns N' Roses were officially announced as the headliner of Coachella on 4 January 2016, and it was confirmed that both Slash and Duff McKagan were rejoining the band.

Guns N' Roses then announced twenty cities as part of a North American leg of the tour dubbed the Not in This Lifetime... Tour. This was a tongue-in-cheek reference to a 2012 interview in which Rose, when asked about when a potential reunion would happen, responded 'not in this lifetime.' The reunion was initially billed as a 'regrouping' by the band instead of a full reunion, since Slash and McKagan were filling empty spots in the existing band line-up. Additional dates in Chicago, New England, New York, and Los Angeles were announced on 25 April 25 due to shows selling out. The enthusiam for tickets continued and by final date in December 2018, the tour had grossed $563.3 million, making it the then second-highest grossing tour, behind only U2's U2 360° Tour.

Guns N' Roses next released a deluxe box set edition of *Appetite for Destruction* named *Appetite for Destruction: Locked N' Loaded*. The enormous set contained a staggering amount of content including seventy-three songs spread over four CDs (forty-nine of which were previously unreleased). Additionally, there were remastered versions of *Appetite, Live ?!*@ Like a Suicide*, an EP of B-sides, as well as twenty-five recordings from the group's 1986 Sound City

Studios sessions produced by Manny Charlton, and two previously unreleased tracks from the group's sessions with Mike Clink. This was all in addition to memorabilia, a book and twelve lithographs.

Locked N' Loaded was released to great critical acclaim and was a huge hit with fans.

Unfortunately there have been no subsequent Guns N' Roses releases of note, however the band have been adamant that they are working on new material since 2017. In February 2019 both Slash and McKagan stated that an album was in the works. Slash reiterated in January 2020 that 'stuff is happening' regarding the new album, blaming 'the nature of the industry right now' for delays.

But whatever happens and whether the new album ever sees the light of day, Guns N' Roses nevertheless leave behind a rock 'n' roll legacy that has yet to be bettered in terms of high drama, excess, massive wealth, hedonism, stupidity, brilliance – and, ultimately, killer songs.

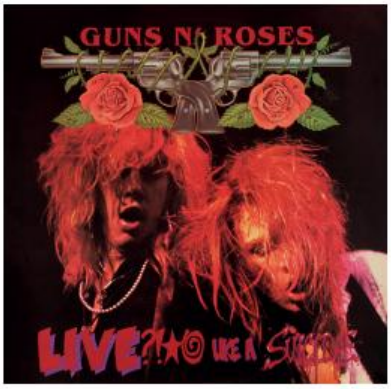
'You know, every so soften I run into the odd kid who puts me or Guns N' Roses onto the level of these guys I was into way back when,' Slash told this author in 2006. 'Bands like Aerosmith, Black Sabbath, Hendrix, Zeppelin, Sex Pistols – and suddenly I'm reminded of how big a rock fan I still am. For a brief second I get that shared feeling – that sense of interaction with some young kid who is coming from the same place that I did. And that, to me, is really what rock music is all about...'

Track-By-Track Analysis

The task of compiling a Guns N' Roses discography isn't too difficult. Unlike other bands who have been in existence twenty-something years, their output is relatively easy to chart: they have recorded and released one EP, four studio albums, one album of cover versions and the obligatory live and compilation records. Beyond that the rest of their music is limited to singles and B-sides, most of them released in a seven year period.

But what does pose something of a quandary is the rating of these releases. In compiling this track-by-track analysis I have attempted to be unflinching in my opinions and many fans are sure to disagree on what constitutes a good or bad song. Guns N' Roses are an undeniably flawed band, but they are also responsible for some of the most exciting (and, very occasionally, ludicrous) music ever made, something I hope these reviews reflect.

I have chosen to grade each album and each song within it. Again, this ultimately comes down to personal opinion, yet I have aimed for a consistency in my ratings, marking each song out of five (★★★★★) in relation to the band's own creative standards and also the wider rock world at large. For example, the 1987 debut album *Appetite for Destruction* defined the zeitgeist of the time and influenced an entire generation, but when the band attempted it again with their *Use Your Illusion* albums in 1991, the rock landscape had changed and grunge was the prevailing genre. Such factors have been taken into account. Choosing only to concentrate on full releases (as opposed to re-issues or unofficial bootlegs) this discography is far from definitive but it does provide a strong overview of the band's key works. All formats refer to the UK market. Enjoy it.



Live?!*@ Like a Suicide

(Uzi Suicide, December 1986)

★★★★

Tracklisting: *Reckless Life / Nice Boys / Move to the City / Mama Kin*

Overview: Though a killer introduction to the sordid world of Guns N' Roses, this debut live EP was later dismissed by Axl Rose as 'the most contrived piece of shit ever'. Apparently the planned original live versions weren't good enough for release so were recorded in a studio, with the sounds of the crowd overdubbed. And though it was perceived to be self-released on the band's own Uzi Suicide label, it was in fact a Geffen-fabricated label to lend the band some independent credibility. Still. It all started here and the belligerently-named *Live?!*@ Like a Suicide* still stands up today. Though an EP, for the sake of simplicity it is included it here as an album.

Reckless Life ★★★★

It was songs such as this that injected some punk rock aggression back into a US rock scene that was becoming increasingly over-run by slick radio-friendly production and lyrical sentimentality. Tellingly, this storming song gave an introductory insight into the mind-set of the band at the time – and exactly where they were intent on going. Broke and living on the edge, it was as if they were projecting their own future through this nihilistic rock outburst: (I'm reckless and feelin' no pain/You know I've got no need to control/Livin' with the danger I'm always on the edge now/With million dollars visions that I hold...)

Nice Boys (Rose Tattoo) ★★★★

The first of many cover versions that Guns N' Roses released over

the next decade, *Nice Boys* was written by Australian rockers Rose Tattoo. They were a spit and sawdust bar-room styled band made from the same machismo mould as countrymen AC/DC. They were introduced to the US in the early-eighties by way of an Aerosmith support slot and their subject matter was equally as rough and tumble. In fact, this song was clearly chosen for the lyrics which seemed to serve as a motto for the new young guns and a warning to the world at large: (Nice boys don't play rock and roll/I'm not a nice boy!) Incidentally Rose Tattoo's other claim to fame involved singer Angry Anderson incongruously soundtracking the 'wedding' of Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan in the Australian TV soap *Neighbours*.

Move to the City ★★★★

Though the lyrics weren't actually written by Rose, this song might as well have been written for him. A raucous early anthem, it exuded a young man's sense of no-hope frustration (You're sixteen and you can't get a job) and petty misdemeanours (You stole your mama's car/And your daddy's plastic credit card) alongside his ambitions. The only option to the protagonist is to – like so many before him – relocate to the bright lights of the big city to make it. It was honest songs like that this that really gave an insight into band and though hardly a manifesto, *Move to the City* encapsulates the trials and tribulations of a bands two steps from skid row – but now very much on the up.

Mama Kin (Aerosmith) ★★★★

Along with the likes of Kiss, Boston-based Aerosmith were the seventies rock fan's band of choice and the band packed arenas stadiums throughout the decade. Though themselves heavily inspired by the Rolling Stones, Steven Tyler's band were a big influence on Guns N' Roses, who paid homage with this rollicking cover first released on Aerosmith's 1973 debut, delivered here with guts and urgency, and at high speed.

Appetite for Destruction
(Geffen, 21 August 1987)

★★★★★

Tracklisting: *Welcome to the Jungle / It's So Easy / Nightrain / Out ta Get Me / Mr. Brownstone / Paradise City / My Michelle / Think About You / Sweet Child o' Mine / You're Crazy / Anything Goes / Rocket Queen.*

Overview: From its low-key launch, the popularity of *Appetite for Destruction* snowballed into the defining album of its time. Perhaps it was the way in which the band transcended rock, metal, punk and blues with a set of snarling songs (not to mention the odd stirring arena rock ballad) delivered with the type of dangerous intent that can't be faked. In 2007, *Kerrang!* magazine declared *Appetite for Destruction* the greatest rock album ever made, pondering the question 'Have you ever met a rock fan who doesn't like some aspect of this album? Thought not. If the devil really has the best tunes, then *Appetite for Destruction* surely takes pride of place in his collection.' Few could rightly disagree. It has sold a staggering eighteen million copies and remains a cornerstone record in rock music.

Welcome to the Jungle ★★★★★

Classic albums invariably need a classic song to open with, and this edgy rock song is four minutes of urban sleaze and youthful menace; a classic in all senses of the word. Axl's howling vocals and the twin guitars of Slash and Izzy Stradlin successfully conspire to paint a portrait of LA's dark-hearted underbelly (though the lyrics were actually written in Seattle). With this song, Guns N' Roses set the tone for an album – and indeed a career.

It's So Easy ★★★★★

This Duff McKagan-penned song was written after the band had

Mickey
& Co.

witnessed a car crash while on tour in New York, inspiring the verse that begins (Cars are crashing every night). The band at their most punk rock and raucous, it had originally been a slower song that Slash and Rose decided to speed-up on the spur of the moment during an early LA show. *It's So Easy* was also the song the band was playing when two fans were tragically killed during the band's set at the Monsters of Rock festival. It remains one of their most covered songs.

Nightrain ★★★★

Believed to take its name from Night Train Express, the band's favoured brand of cheap Californian wine, *Nightrain* is a warts-and-all celebration of the skid row hedonism and prolonged substance abuse of the band during their early communal-living years. Incidentally, sales of Night Train Express increased three-hundred percent in the wake of its release.

Out Ta Get Me ★★★★

A hefty slice of musical paranoia, this song, *Out ta Get Me* was inspired by Axl Rose's many brushes with the law while living back in Indiana, before forming the band. Of course, Guns N' Roses themselves courted even more controversy and police heat and this tightly-wound song is the band's unambiguous retort: (They're out ta get me/They won't catch me/Because I'm fuckin' innocent!)

Mr. Brownstone ★★★★★

Once it's understood that 'brownstone' is street-slang term for heroin, the meaning of this song is obvious. The band's debut UK single, *Mr. Brownstone* brilliantly captures the lifestyle of a junkie and lays down the terms of grim addiction in the simplest of terms, epitomised by key lines such as (I used to do a little but a little wouldn't do/So the little got more and more...) Perhaps best of all are the menacing atmospherics and the snake-hipped shimmy that propelled this song from club to arena, making it a storming live favourite.

Paradise City ★★★★★

Arguably the song that took the band to the world, *Paradise City* is an autobiographical and anthemic account of a wide-eyed country boy – Axl Rose, basically – drawn to the bright lights of the City of Angels, only to find it more corrupt than he could have imagined. The lyrics are bitter-sweet and more than little ironic, while the prolonged intro segues first into a hard-hitting verse, then a frenzied conclusion designed for mosh-pits the world over. Upon its release as a single, it reached No. 4 in the Billboard charts and remains one of the most important rock songs ever written.

My Michelle ★★★★

Another musical postcard from the edge, *My Michelle* packs a mean punch; a sleaze-rock classic with the band at their strutting, forthright best. The Michelle in question is Michelle Young, a friend of Axl's whose life he tenderly romanticised, before opting to re-write the lyrics in order to unflinchingly portray the gritty truth – most notably her father's involvement in the pornographic industry, drug addiction and the death of her mother. 'Axl comes to me with these lyrics one day and I go "Oh Axl. You really can't say that."' Remembered Slash. 'I mean, we'd known this girl for years...'

Think About You ★★★★

With the appearance of acoustic guitars and lyrics largely concerned with love, *Think About You* is a relatively tender – though nevertheless ferociously delivered – rock song that dates back to the band's earliest shows of 1985, and which only slows down towards the end. It is however one of the album's lesser songs – no major criticism, given the high standard of songs.

Sweet Child o' Mine ★★★★

The most recognisable guitar riff in rock music? Quite possibly. From the sincere-sounding, poetic lyrics to the moody mid-song 'Where do

we go?' breakdown to the swirling guitar work of Slash, *Sweet Child o' Mine* covered all the bases of what makes a great rock anthem. If Guns N' Roses are remembered for one song, then this must surely be the song, which for once was a collaborative work between all the band members. Endearingly, they claim it was written 'as a joke' in five minutes during rehearsals. 'I hated it,' said Slash, 'for me, at the time, it was a sappy ballad.'

You're Crazy ★★★★

Originally titled *Fucking Crazy*, this up-tempo song rattles along towards terminal velocity. Originally written as an acoustic song it was given a filthy rock makeover for the band's debut, though it reappeared as an acoustic song once again on *Lies*. Here Axl Rose's abrasive, high-pitched vocals are particularly pleasing.

Anything Goes ★★★

There's a more than a touch of early Aerosmith in the guitar work (including the Joe Perry-inspired talk box used on the guitar solo) on this short, sharp song that dates back to Axl's former band Hollywood Rose. Subject-wise, it is a straight forward eighties hard rock sex song that leaves little to the imagination and is not exactly Shakespearean in its insight: (Panties 'round your knees/With your ass in debris/Doin' dat grind with a push and squeeze...)

Rocket Queen ★★★★

Guns N' Roses legend has it that Axl Rose hired the services of a woman – arguably a prostitute – and proceeded to record the sound of them having sex in the studio, to incorporate into the song. Whether true or not, it is a lascivious leer of a song that encapsulated the spirit of the cat-houses of Sunset Boulevard and the greasy rockers who inhabited them, while also featuring a heartfelt ballad mid section. A fitting close to an album that is the archetypal 'all killer, no filler'.

G N' R Lies

(Geffen, 30 November 1988)

★★★★

Tracklisting: *Reckless Life / Nice Boys / Move to the City / Mama Kin / Patience / I Used to Love Her / You're Crazy / One in a Million*

Overview: Released to capitalise on the unexpected success of their debut twelve months earlier, *Lies* (as it is generally known) was the archetypal game of two halves, released just as the quintet was entering the stratosphere. The first four were the 'live' songs lifted straight from the band's lesser known *Live Like a Suicide* debut, while the latter four were new acoustic-based songs released – presumably – to show the band's more reflective side. That the venomous lyrics to *One in a Million* caused an uproar and brought accusation of bigotry certainly suggested that this band was as uncompromising as their debut had suggested. It seemed that there was a hidden side to Axl Rose, who not for the last time responded by saying he was 'misunderstood'. Either way, none of the fuss prevented the release selling five million copes and musically at least, *Lies* showed a keen evolution. The first four tracks – *Reckless Life*, *Nice Boys*, *Move to the City* and *Mama Kin* – are documented above, followed by...

Patience ★★★★

Whistling? Gently strummer guitars? Lovey-dovey lyrics? Was this the same highly sexualised Guns N' Roses of the year before? Seemingly so. Despite the initial surprise of hearing Guns N' Roses slow down and mellow it, this is a beautifully constructed, heartfelt love song that was well received with the band's fanbase.

Used to Love Her ★★★

Penned by Rose and Stradlin', this track is the band at their most lyrically flippant. Though the subject matter is suitably dark – it's about a man who murders his wife then buries her in their back yard and has the full title *Used to Love Her (But I Had to Kill Her)* – the band claimed it was only ever meant as a joke track. Indeed, below this song's title on the album's tabloid headline artwork is the phrase 'A joke, nothing more. Actually it's pretty self-explanatory if you ask me!'

You're Crazy ★★★

As mentioned, this *Appetite for Destruction* track was returned here to its original downbeat version. It's a strong song, though its inclusion on an album that already felt like it had been hastily put-together – only three of the eight songs on *Lies* were new – raised a few eyebrows.

One In a Million ★

This song remains Guns N' Roses' most controversial moment to date. It was all down to Axl's lyrics which, though he vaguely claimed weren't necessarily his opinions, when taken at value were seen as racist, homophobic and xenophobic. It's evident in lines such as (Immigrants and faggots, they make no sense to me/They come to our country, and think they'll do as they please) or (Police and niggers, that's right/Get out of my way). Ever the egotist, rather than explain himself, Axl threatened to withdraw the song as 'the public don't deserve it'. It was rarely performed live and marks a low point in the band's creative output.

Use Your Illusion I

(Geffen, 16 September 1991)

★★★

Tracklisting: *Right Next Door to Hell / Dust N' Bones / Live and Let Die / Don't Cry (Original) / Perfect Crime / You Ain't the First / Bad Obsession / Back Off Bitch / Double Talkin' Jive / November Rain / The Garden / Garden of Eden / Don't Damn Me / Bad Apples / Dead Horse / Coma*

Overview: (*Use Your Illusion I* and *Use Your Illusion II*) Adjectives such as 'hotly-anticipated' and 'long-awaited' could have been made for Guns N' Roses' second – and third – full studio albums, released as doubles on consecutive days. If ever there was any doubt that the band (and especially Axl Rose) had grandiose and daring ideas that were surely a recent by-product of their rapidly inflating egos, then *Use Your Illusions I* and *II* confirmed that the band had made the leap to stadium-filling rock gods of the highest order with much tenacity. It was a process that wasn't without casualties, as this re-jigged line-up confirmed. Productivity-wise, the band were at a peak that was never matched again and thirty new songs that ran the rock gamut were certainly value for money. The releases contained a clutch of highlights, but over these two complementary albums, which contained many more Axl Rose-lead piano ballads and excursions into blues and country, the band somehow never quite matched the swaggering menace of their debut. Incidentally, though the albums had identical artwork with its red cover *Use Your Illusion I* was angrier and heavier in content, while *Use Your Illusion II* was largely a more blues-based set of songs.

Right Next Door to Hell ★★★★

In just one of numerous high-profile brushes with the law during the band's ascension, charges were brought against Axl Rose by

AXL ROSE

neighbour Gabriella Kantor, who claimed the singer had hit her with a wine bottle. This no-nonsense opener was believed to be Rose's vitriolic response. Like a song from *Appetite for Destruction* it had both bite and bark and flies by in three frantic minutes – a fine opener.

Dust N' Bones ★★★

Quite a contrast to the above track, *Dust N' Bones* is the sound of a rock band trying a little too hard to embrace the blues. Honky-tonk pianos and a dirt-stomping beat certainly go some way to making it a credible blues-rock song, though the end result isn't a million miles away from Bon Jovi when they made musical forays into the wild west.

Live and Let Die ★★★

This much-covered song was first written and performed by Paul McCartney and his late wife Linda in their post-Beatles band Wings in 1973 for the James Bond film of the same name. It was a strange choice of cover version for Guns N' Roses, not least because it was already a hugely successful song. A pop song with unique composition, the band at least had the good grace to inject it with even more straight-faced crooning pomposity, dramatic guitar figurations and a more explosive finale than the original.

Don't Cry (Original) ★★★

The first of two versions to appear on the *Use Your Illusion* albums, this version is the original. Like the more successful *November Rain* it treads the line between credible rock song and rather insipid ballad. It certainly seemed as if snake-eyed Axl had lost the venom from his fangs, though he claimed this was the first song the band ever wrote. It's notable for featuring Axl's drawn-out, much parodied drawn one-note conclusion and backing vocals from Blind Melon singer Shannon Hoon, a friend of Axl from Indiana, who later died of an accidental cocaine overdose in 1995.

Perfect Crime ★★★★

Delivered with a sense of urgency, *Perfect Crime* is a song that highlight the band's punk roots, even if it is the epitome of a sleaze-rock songs. At just two-and-a-half minutes it's also one of the shortest over this quadruple album set. Perhaps if the band had shows as much economy elsewhere, they might have matched the success of *Appetite for Destruction*, which the song would have sounded perfectly at home on.

You Ain't the First ★★★

Guns N' Roses handle melancholic blues songs well, though songs such as this pale by comparison when placed next to, say, the harder-edged *Perfect Crime*. This Southern strum is simple though, and displays subtlety that more often than not became lost amongst their more grandiose ideas. Gentle – which isn't a word normally associated with Axl and company.

Bad Obsession ★★★

The blues informs this song too, but this time in the form of a lascivious strutting song heavily influenced by *Exile on Main Street* – era Rolling Stones and early Aerosmith. Unsurprisingly, it's very to similar to the then-emerging Atlanta band Black Crowes, who drew from the same blues-rock sources. Axl's vocals sound as laconic as they possibly can.

Back Off Bitch ★★

Back Off Bitch is another song that the band wrote pre-*Appetite for Destruction* but opted to leave off their debut. At a time when the quartet were doing little to dispel perceptions that they were little more than unreconstructed misogynists, writing a song that warns women to keep their distance may not have been the greatest of ideas. A cliché- addled, low IQ song that conforms to the sexist rocker stereotype a little too easily.

Double Talkin' Jive ★★★

This slinky subterranean-sounding song with its delicate Spanish guitar coda offers another side to the band.

November Rain ★★★

The biggest and most successful song from *Use Your Illusion I* is surely Axl Rose's attempt at sensitivity, while attempting the epic structure of equally as over-long songs such as *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Stairway to Heaven* and, slightly more bizarrely, Pet Shop Boys' *My October Symphony*, which Axl cited as an influence. It's either the biggest load of overblown pompous rock nonsense that epitomises everything that was wrong with fatuous stadium rock at the dawn of the nineties, or the sound of a band maturing gracefully, complete with string section and all. That it was a huge hit – helped largely by an iconic and utterly ridiculous video that cost $1.5 million to make and took residency on MTV – remains indisputable.

The Garden ★★★

Featuring rock legend Alice Cooper, this is another song that also features backing vocals from Shannon Hoon and was co-written by Axl with friend, writer and sometime road manager Del James. The spoken nightmarish narrative, delivered in faux-horror tones, seems a tad ridiculous but the instrumentation and orchestration is epic and the basic melody and intonation on which the song hangs is strangely infectious.

Garden of Eden ★★

The heavy riffing of this song owes just as much to the trash metal of bands that Guns N' Roses competed with commercially (chiefly, Metallica) as any other style and many fans recognised the lyrics as being some of the band's most political. There's certainly little ambiguity to lyrics such as (Our governments are dangerous/And out

of control) though the straight-forward song offers little in the way of solutions.

Don't Damn Me ★

If there's an argument that *Use Your Illusion* should have been released a single albums, then consider this, exhibit A – a song that positively plods, despite the band's best efforts, and a set of post relationship break-up lyrics which are far from original.

Bad Apples ★★

It's interesting to note that songs such as *Bad Apples* weren't deemed good enough for the band's earliest records, yet are given an airing here. The use of honky-tonk piano injects a bit of colour, but it is around about this point in the album that band sound are entering self-parody and lyrics such as (Hell, I'm just another guy) are just clearly not true!

Dead Horse ★★

With an intro not vastly dissimilar to *One in a Million*, this is the only song on *Use Your Illusion I* to feature Rose on guitar – but that's the only thing that's remarkable on it. That and the fact that is features, in turn, the sound effect of a nutcracker and a cassette tape being re-wound.

Coma ★★★

At over ten minutes in length, *Coma* shoehorns in just about every musical idea that Guns N' Roses have tucked up their sleeves: exemplary guitar playing, dark-hearted lyrics, tempo changes, drum crescendos and many separate parts. It even features the voices of the doctors who helped Axl after what some believe to have been an overdose. Naturally, it's too long but it just about works. 'I tried to write that song for a year, and couldn't.' Said Rose. 'I went to write it at the studio and passed out. I woke up two hours later and sat

SHIT
HAPPENS

down and wrote the whole end of the song, like, just off the top of my head… it just poured out.'

Use Your Illusion II

(Geffen, 17 September 1991)

★★★

Tracklisting: *Civil War / 14 Years / Yesterdays / Knockin' on Heaven's Door / Get in the Ring / Shotgun Blues / Breakdown / Pretty Tied Up / Locomotive / So Fine / Estranged / You Could Be Mine / Don't Cry (Alt. Lyrics) / My World*

Civil War ★★★★

An epic opener to the more politically-charged of the two albums, *Civil War* is Guns N' Roses at their most socially-minded and was partly inspired by a young Duff McKagan's experiences of a peace march in honour of Martin Luther King. It begins with a dialogue sample from the film *Cool Hand Luke*, and references the folk anthem *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, the assassination of JFK and, at the end, a variation on Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile*. In its widest context it is a classic rock protest song about war of any kind, posing the question 'What's so civil about war anyway?' *Civil War* is also notable for being the final song to feature a departing Steven Adler on drums, soon to be replaced by Matt Sorum.

14 Years ★★★

Very much an Izzy Stradlin song, *14 years* documents the guitarist's thoughts on his relationship with Axl Rose, whom he had known for fourteen years. Lines such as (These past four years of madness put me straight) refer to the transitional period where Guns went global and Izzy descended into drug and alcohol addiction – and this is his riposte to the increasingly ego-driven frontman. A decent song sung by Stradlin then, though the guitarist ultimately lost his battle with Rose, if not narcotics. He left the band a mere two months after this album's release.

Yesterdays ★★★

A relatively no-nonsense rock song with a ballad quality and the usual soaring Slash/Stradlin guitar sound. Subject-wise, it is a song about emotionally maturing and not looking back, a sentiment played out on a wider scale across the more thoughtful direction of the album as a whole. However, compared to other songs, it remains a fairly unremarkable addition to the Guns N' Roses canon.

Knockin' on Heaven's Door ★★★★

Bob Dylan is sacred ground to many, but Guns N' Roses clearly felt themselves more than up to the task of reworking this emotive American classic, which has been covered by numerous other artists. First written as a slow country song for the 1973 film *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* the song quickly reached iconic status. This version is as wistful as the original, although where Dylan's delivery was low-key, you can't help but think that Axl is over-emoting somewhat. Nevertheless, complete with a gospel choir, the song was perfect for a big rock lighters-in-the air makeover and their tenacity paid off when the single release reached No. 2 in the UK singles chart.

Get in the Ring ★★

Of all the songs on the two albums, this song arguably gained the most press coverage, and given it is an all-out on attack on the critics who had dared to give Guns N' Roses less than favourable reviews, it's hardly surprising. A vitriolic critique that effectively offers various journalists and publications – *Kerrang!*, *Spin*, *Hit Parade*, *Circus* – out for a fight, it is a malevolent, absurd and often laughable song in which the increasingly 'misunderstood' Rose assumes the position of the untouchable rock star representing 'the kids'. He argues that (You're pissed off because your Dad gets more pussy than you) while conveniently forgetting that the press had certainly helped his band get to where they were. Naturally it was just one more reason to suggest that Rose's ego was the biggest in rock music. File under: Silly.

Shotgun Blues ★★

Verbal violence and seeking revenge is certainly one theme of this album, as *Shotgun Blues* – a raucous glam/punk song inspired in some part by the sound of Hanoi Rocks and littered with the usual cuss words and empty threats - merely confirms. In fact, it almost works as an accompaniment to *Get in the Ring*. Once again, Axl paints himself as the one has been wronged – whether by a lover or a hater: (You walk a mile in shoes/And then tell me 'bout singing the blues).

Breakdown ★★★

If, circa 1988, anyone had suggested that Slash would soon be strumming a banjo they would have no doubt been met with laughter. But sure enough, *Breakdown* featured he of the tall top hat adding some down-home authenticity to another bluesy tune. But it also a song with fire in it belly that resolutely refuses to settle down. At seven minutes it's over-long by half, though.

Pretty Tied Up ★★

Sub-titled *The Perils of Rock 'n' Roll Decadence*, this is another song which mixes standard Guns N' Roses images of sexual and violence – invariably with the woman as victim. In this case *Pretty Tied Up* considers a 'chick' who gets off on bondage and humiliation: (She' pretty tied up hanging' upside down/She's pretty tied up and you can ride her) Rose might argue he's merely telling a tale – feminist critics might have a little more to say on the subject...

Locomotive ★★★★

This song represents something of a departure. A charging funk-metal song that also occasionally recalls the turbo-grunge of the then-popular Soundgarden (who, along with Faith No More, supported Guns N' Roses on their stadium tour that year) with undercurrents of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, it's an edgy, slippery song that practically

slithers out of your stereo's speakers. It's also complex and orchestrated with precision but again, just short of nine minutes though it's another song that's way too long and once again suggests that Axl Rose is aiming for rock's super-league alongside artists such as Freddie Mercury and Elton John. In other words: it suffers for its own grandiose ambitions. But it remains an album highlight.

So Fine ★★★

Influential and ill-fated former New York Dolls and Heartbreakers guitarist Johnny Thunders epitomised the hard living archetypal rock star during the punk years and here Duff McKagan pays tribute to the man who died of an overdose while Guns N' Roses were busy recording this album. They later paid tribute again with his version of Thunders' key moment *You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory*. It's actually a fairly perfunctory rock song, though McKagan's impassioned vocals have character and provide some much-needed respite from Axl's abrasive howl. But why is it that Guns N' Roses are somehow far less convincing being earnest and sensitive than they are at being kick-ass?

Estranged ★★★

It shows considerable ego and tenacity to include another epic song on an already overwhelming quadruple album package, and *Estranged* – which is nine minutes long was accompanied by one of the world's most expensive videos – is another example. It's a complex song of many verses and, on the sleevenotes even thanks Slash 'for the killer guitar riffs'. For fans of meandering rock songs with some surprisingly delicate vocals from Rose, *Estranged* is surely a classic – for those who prefer the three minute whiplash punk of the earlier years, it's frustrating.

You Could Be Mine ★★★★

Lyrics to this song – namely (With your bitch slap-rappin' and your

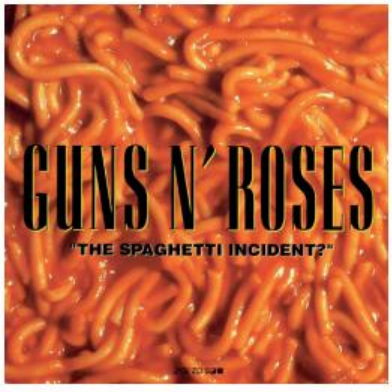
cocaine tongue/You get nuthin' done) – first appeared as something of a band maxim on the liner notes to *Appetite for Destruction*. Here they build an (admittedly over-produced) song around it, which was used on the hugely successful *Terminator 2* movie, and introduced the band to an even wider audience. The band even had dinner with new fan Arnold Schwarzenegger to seal the deal. It's perfect soundtrack material for an explosive, dumb action movie and as the lead single from both albums, *You Could Be Mine* soon became Guns N' Roses' second most successful single ever. It also firmly established them as part of the Hollywood/mainstream world of entertainment.

Don't Cry (Alternate Lyrics) ★★★

Much the same as the version on *Use Your Illusion*, the only major difference is Axl's lyrics – the music and the chorus remains exactly the same. Which leads one to wonder why bother including such a similar song? And the answer to that is surely because they are Guns N' Roses and they could. And because they had no-one to tell them not to.

My World ★★

Another slight departure here, with a piece that begins with a weird cyber-dance/rock intro, but rather than kicking into another classic rock song is more a montage of sound containing only drums, vocals and effects. It's too short and inconsequential to leave much of an impression and thirty songs and two-and-half hours after it began, *Use Your Illusion I* and *II* draws to a close with more of a whimper than a bang. The albums may have many faults, but a lack of value for money for fans was at least not one of them.



The Spaghetti Incident
(Geffen, 23 November 1993)

★★★

Tracklisting: *Since I Don't Have You / New Rose / Down on the Farm / Human Being / Raw Power / Ain't It Fun / Buick Makane / Hair of the Dog / Attitude / Black Leather / You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory / I Don't Care About You / Look at Your Game Girl (hidden track)*

Overview: An album of (largely punk rock-leaning) cover versions with a ridiculous title and comical cover was the last thing most Guns N' Roses fans expected after the pomp-rock ambition of its predecessor, but if *The Spaghetti Incident* revealed anything, it was that Guns N' Roses rarely did the expected. However, the music was, for the most part, utterly mediocre, an even less recognisable version of the band turning songs by the likes of The Damned, Marc Bolan, the Misfits and Johnny Thunders to uniform stadium rock songs. It sold a quarter the amount of either *Use Your Illusion* album and left critics and fans wondering: what's the point?

Since I Don't Have You ★★★

The opening track to this album is the only song not from the seventies or eighties and consequently quite different sound-wise from the rest of the album. First performed by the Skyliners it's a pretty dreamy, doo-wop-leaning 'heartbreak ballad' from 1959. It was a big R&B hit the first time and here Guns N' Roses deliver a relatively affectionate version, the only major difference being Axl's distinct vocals which are somewhat different from the more palatable pop croon of the original. Recorded by a very different version from the late eighties model of Guns N' Roses it crawled to a disappointing No. 69 in the Billboard 100 upon its release a single, though it is one of the strongest songs on this album.

New Rose ★★

The Damned's 1976 debut *New Rose* is widely credited with being the first ever UK punk single release, being the likes of Sex Pistols and The Clash – chronologically if not artistically. Here, with Duff on vocals, they manage a pretty energetic version of a song about the trials and tribulations of relationships, though the raw production of the original is diluted by Guns N' Roses' usual over production and ability to quell their desire to layer everything in many, many guitars. As the rest of *The Spaghetti Incident?* demonstrates, multi-millionaire nineties rock stars just can't match poverty-stricken seventies punks in terms of energy, vigour and adrenaline-pumping economical music.

Down On the Farm ★★

Again, they turn their hand to punk – this time to the long-standing second division Brit band UK Subs. Given the wealth of material punk produced it's possibly an odd choice, and one they might have pulled off had Axl Rose's not attempted to sing in a forced cockney accent (just listen to his plumy pronunciation of the word 'Soho' for one example) and once again filled it with histrionic guitar soloing. The delivery is thunderous, but it's all a bit pointless. Still, another flagging band were surely welcome to receive a fat royalty cheque in the post. It ends with sound of Axl 'baa-ing' like a sheep. Enough said.

Human Being ★★

As mentioned, the New York Dolls and Johnny Thunders were a pivotal influence on Guns N' Roses and here they pay tribute with the relatively obscure Dolls track *Human Being*. With pianos rattling over an unrelenting backbeat, this version oddly almost resembles the theatrical cabaret-rock of seventies Meatloaf. Frankly, it isn't half as good as anything that the Dolls ever did. It's also difficult to imagine NY's finest/most shambolic ever playing a song that lasts seven minutes.

HANOI ROCKS

Raw Power ★★

Another key influence was Iggy Pop's Detroit proto-punk band the Stooges and *Raw Power* was the title song from their 1973 album. Again, Guns N' Roses manage to remove all the danger and edginess of a volatile band and instead, bafflingly replace it with Dizzy Reed's unoriginal piano work. This is what happens when bands get too much freedom, an unlimited budget for the recording studio... and don't have Iggy Pop as their frontman.

Ain't It Fun ★★★

Cleveland's the Dead Boys were one of the US' earliest and most notorious seventies punk bands attracted to the emerging New York scene, and whose destructive frontman Stiv Bators was also an associate of the likes of Johnny Thunders and The Damned. This track first appeared on their second (and final) full studio album. Joining the band on this version for co-vocals is Michael Monroe, androgynous frontman with Hanoi Rocks, the excellent and sometimes ludicrous Finnish band whose style and sound Guns N' Roses appropriated heavily. It sounds a little like Hanoi Rocks. This is actually a good thing.

Buick Makane (Big Dumb Sex) ★★

Marc Bolan's T. Rex and Chris Cornell's grunge kings Soundgarden may not be natural bedfellows, but that doesn't stop the band from soldering the former's glitter rock belter *Buick Makane* onto the latter's big rock song, with a mundane outcome. It's a medley and is one more indication that *The Spaghetti Incident?* was knocked out between the twin darks clouds of an endless hangover and looming contractual obligations.

Hair of the Dog ★★★

Though not a major band in today's musical history books, Scottish rock band Nazareth had some success in the seventies with their no-

nonsense rock songs – their 1975 *Hair of the Dog* album sold a cool million copies in the US and influenced many bands who followed in their wake. With a throbbing, cowbell-driven beat, here Guns N' Roses remain fairly true to the strutting original and the lyrics that sing of a 'red hot Momma' are familiar ground. The talk box guitar sound contributes to an invigorating melody, but it's still far from brilliant.

Attitude ★★

New Jersey ghoul punks the Misfits were hugely influential on the punk, hardcore, thrash and more theatrical end of hard rock. At under ninety seconds in length, this version of *Attitude* takes the original and – perhaps unsurprisingly – polishes it with a slicker rock sound, and Duff McKagan (the band's biggest punk fan) proves him himself easily as adept as Rose at singing such songs. It's over before you know it.

Black Leather ★★

Another odd choice, *Black Leather* was first released in 1979 by the Professionals, the short-lived band put together by guitarist Steve Jones and drummer Paul Cook shortly after the split of their previous band, Sex Pistols. In fact, this song first came to light under the Pistols name as part of a posthumous collection. Simply put, the Professionals weren't very good and this version is nothing more than a rock-by-numbers song, where lyrical clichés abound.

You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory ★★

In which the fragile heartfelt acoustic sentiments of Johnny Thunders are buried beneath guitars, an extra layer of cheese and the occasional pointless vocal ad-lib (This one's for you Johnny!) Any existing fans of this song – and there are many – must surely have felt a sense of disappointment upon hearing this. Duff McKagan's gruff, drunken-sounding vocals are somewhat flat and the overall production is

reduced to MTV-friendly rock. The only upside is that in covering this, Thunders' work was hopefully deservedly discovered by a new generation of rock fans.

I Don't Care About You ★★★

LA punks Fear was a cult band who, alongside the likes of Black Flag and The Germs, notable for contributing to the creation of the fertile Californian hardcore scene and for briefly featuring Red Hot Chili Peppers assist Flea in their line-up. This is a pretty full-on delivery of one of their songs, with a celebratory sleaze-rock delivery. Again, unlike most of the band's own compositions on 'Use Your Illusion', at two minutes in length it is pleasingly short.

Look at Your Game Girl (Hidden Track) ★★★★

The inclusion of this song by messianic convicted murderer Charles Manson as an unlisted hidden track was the topic of much discussion and controversy. Actually, Manson penned some interesting music in the late sixties, and Axl justified the inclusion of this to his bandmates who were opposed to this gentle-sounding song, by saying that Manson was misunderstood. Ironically it is one of the stronger moments on a pretty dull record and which, taken in context, is also shrouded in darkness. Rose also said the song would be moved from future versions of the album because 'people don't understand the art of it', though it still remains on *The Spaghetti Incident?* today. Royalties for the song are believed to have gone to relatives of Manson's victims.

GUNS N' ROSES

MUSIC LEGENDS